Refugees and Immigrants – toward a more Open Society

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Multiculturalism in the past and its end

From the sixteenth to the twentieth century, Hungary was basically a multicultural country. In the register of students at the largest university in the kingdom of Hungary, in Tirnavia (in the present-day Slovak Republic), beside the names of students you could read "natio Germanica," "natio Hungarica," "natio Slavica," indicating students of German, Hungarian or Slavic nationality. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Royal University Press in Buda published books in Serbian, Romanian, Slovak and Ukrainian. Even later, during the period when the nation state idea was flourishing and the twin cities of Buda and Pest were increasingly becoming the political and cultural centre of Hungary, their populations were mainly German speaking. On the other hand, the city of Novi Sad, inside the historical territory of Hungary**,** was one of the most important centres of Serbian culture. In 1910, before the First World War, the mother tongue of half of Hungary's citizens was Romanian, Slovak, Serbian, German or languages other than Hungarian. Only about half of the population spoke Hungarian as their first language.

This historic multiculturalism, however, had been eliminated by the end of the First World War. According to the peace treaty, two-thirds of Hungary's territory and half of its population were given to neighbouring countries. In human terms, this meant that three million ethnic Hungarians became citizens of new or enlarged states. All of this contributed to the rise of radical nationalism both in Hungary and in other countries of the region. This rise led to a tragic end as in the last year of the Second World War half a million Jews were deported from Hungary to death camps. By the end of the war, the once multicultural Hungary had became – ironically speaking - an ethnically purged country.

Books often referred to post-war Communism as an internationalist movement. In reality, however, the "existing" Socialism excluded everything that was not forced and supported by the ruling Communist party. For citizens of countries in the Soviet block, the Iron Curtain meant that they were not allowed to travel abroad freely. Indeed, the Iron Curtain also meant that all kinds of free movements were hindered. People could not move from one so-called Socialist country to another one, they could not employ labour from another country unless organized by the states, and countries could not receive refugees unless specifically approved by the Soviet Communist Party. All non-citizens staying in a Soviet Bloc country were strictly controlled by a central police authority closely linked to the state security apparatus. These countries stayed out of the mass influx of host workers, asylum-seekers and students that created a huge population of foreigners in most Western society.

This situation did not improve much after the political changes. While in the old Länder of Germany about 15 percent of the population are or were foreigners, in the new Länder there are just a handful Vietnamese. Xenophobia is still stronger in the former GDR than in the former West Germany.

From welcoming refugees to the campaign against illegal migrants

The first wave of immigration reached Hungary shortly before the political changes. From 1988 to 1990 48 thousand Romanian asylum-seekers arrived in Hungary, some legally, some crossing the green border. They escaped from the brutal and insane dictatorship of Ceausescu. Most of the asylum-seekers were ethnic Hungarians who had suffered under a double oppression. In Romania they had been oppressed both as average citizens and as members of a national minority. Because everybody in Hungary knew what was happening in Romania, and because Hungarians from Transylvania were seen as fellow-Hungarians, the

asylum-seekers were accepted with a lot of sympathy. In March 1989 Hungary was the first state of the Soviet block to join the Geneva Convention, however it did so with geographic limitations. The government certainly was not willing to accept third world refugees and they could not imagine that aside from those from Romania any other European might seek asylum in Hungary.

It turned out rather quickly that this forecast was wrong. After the war broke out in Yugoslavia, 63 thousand Croats, Serbs, and Hungarians arrived in Hungary in just a few weeks. This number was larger than the total of all other asylum-seekers from the day the asylum law had become effective on March 1, 1998 until now. Still, people felt rather compassionate towards the victims of the irrational war, and in the South of Hungary many families opened their homes to the refugees and collected blankets and money for them.

Soon after those events, however, the atmosphere started changing. The political changes were followed by a severe economic crisis, the system of the artificially sustained full employment collapsed and people turned against the newcomers from Romania who were often employed at lower wages. But a much more general and blind hostility against aliens and refugees started as the government initiated a campaign, directed by the conservative Minister of Interior, against "illegal migrants." "Hungary is full," he said. "Aliens just make trouble so we have to protect the nation against an influx of foreigners." Alien policing authorities, officials, police or border guard officers are still using this language. They never speak about asylum-seekers but about illegal migrants who have violated the rules of border crossing and are a public menace. This kind of approach has even survived changes in the government and has found support in the anti-refugee rhetoric of some politicians of the European Union.

Hungary and the other new Central European EU member states which, in the previous decades of the twentieth century, used to send millions of refugees to the Western world have not turned into refugee reception countries. They are still transit countries for asylum-seekers. In the seven years from 1988 to the end of 2004, 46,385 asylum-seekers were registered in Hungary. In 1999, the year of the highest influx (11,499 applications), 50 percent of all status determination procedures were terminated. In 2000 and 2001 64 percent and 46 percent, respectively, of all status determination procedures were terminated. That means that on average half of asylum-seekers left the country illegally within one month of their arrival in Hungary. But those who did not leave in the first month usually left later after their claims were rejected, or received humanitarian protection or were recognised as refugees. In 1988, because of pressure by the Austrian government, Hungarian authorities transformed community shelters into detention centres and thousands of asylum-seekers, including minors and babies mainly from Kosovo, were detained for several months. This encouraged refugees to move on to the UK, France, Germany or Sweden. This did not stop after Dublin II either. Since Hungary joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, Hungarian authorities in 460 cases agreed to take back an asylum-seeker who first submitted his or her claim in Hungary. But only 135 of the 460 were actually returned. The others disappeared immediately once they understood that they could be transported back to Central Europe. During the seven years mentioned above, only 1,477 persons (3.2 percent of all applicants) were recognised as refugees based on the Geneva Convention. Nobody can say how many of them are still in Hungary but an estimate by the asylum authority suggests that there are no more than 350. Asylum-seekers want to leave. The Office for Immigration and Nationality wants them to leave. This huge organisation responsible for refugees and the deportation of illegal migrants, which was set up four years ago as a substitute for the old regime's notorious Central Office for Controlling Foreigners, has almost realised its vision: a refugee free Hungary.

Integration – does it exist?

Seeking asylum is just one way to settle down in a country. Others apply for a work permit and a residence permit that usually expires in one year. After three years they can apply for the settlement permit that was once called an immigration permit. On December 31, 2004 there were 40,568 people with a residence permit and 111,990 people with a settlement or immigration permit. That is all together 1.5 percent of the entire population. In Vienna 16 percent, in Frankfurt am Main about 25 percent of the inhabitants are foreigners. 81 percent even of those who posses a Hungarian settlement or residence permit came from neighbouring countries, meaning that they are mainly ethnic Hungarians who speak Hungarian as their mother tongue. Nobody knows if "real" foreigners do not want to settle down in Hungary or they have to face such difficulties that they do not apply at all. Chinese are certainly willing to come and to stay; they are often successful as merchants, and Chinese restaurants are popular in Hungary. Still, at the end of last year there were no more

than 3,865 Chinese with a settlement or immigration permit. The others still have to renew their residence permit every year.

Sixty-nine percent of those who were seeking asylum in industrialised countries between 2000 and 2004 submitted their application in countries that now are part of the European Union: 62 percent of those were in the 15 old member states, 7 percent in the new ones. Furthermore, the proportion of those who have been staying in the new member states after they are recognized as refugees is obviously much, much lower. The key element is integration. In general, the new member states share neither the burden nor the responsibility of protecting refugees with the old member states. In Hungary, status determination procedures have improved quite a lot recently. But no integration strategy exists. Humanitarian protection is still considered as short and temporary protection. Therefore, integration efforts of those who have this kind of protection are hindered rather than supported. In the case of Convention refugees, it is a state's duty to support integration. But in practice, there are no effective language courses, and no vocational training programs. From 1999 to 2001, 17,612 persons were naturalised (86 percent of them former or ethnic Hungarians) but only 54 refugees became Hungarian citizens.

RECOMMENDATION

The European Refugee Fund spends a lot of money on refugee protection and integration programs. However, funding integration will not be effective if authorities are not directly interested in keeping refugees and other legal migrants in the country. Those responsible for integration programs should work out a model in which integration support will be paid on a per capita basis related to the number of persons who are really staying in a country. This is important not only in order to share the responsibility among old and new member states but also because a moderated integration of refugees and immigrants would help to transform these closed societies into more open ones. Into societies as open as Hungary used to be in the eighteenth century.